MARIA LIND ON THE CURATORIAL

IS THERE SOMETHING we could call the curatorial? A way of linking objects, images, processes, people, locations, histories, and discourses in physical space? An endeavor that encourages you to start from the artwork but not stay there, to think with it but also away from and against it? I believe so, and I imagine this mode of curating to operate like an active catalyst, generating twists, turns, and tensions - owing much to site-specific and context-sensitive practices and even more to various traditions of institutional critique. The curatorial would thus parallel Chantal Mouffe’s notion of “the political,” an aspect of life that cannot be separated from divergence and dissent, a set of practices that disturbs existing power relations. At its best, the curatorial is a viral presence that strives to create friction and push new ideas, whether from curators or artists, educators or editors. This proposition demands that we continue to renegotiate the conventions of curating. And it asks that we look closely at recent curatorial projects to find potential avenues for curating during the decade ahead. In this regard, the 2008 São Paulo Bienal, curated by Ivo Mesquita and Ana Paula Cohen, was exemplary. Of the two hundred or so biennials in the world, São Paulo is the second oldest (the first being Venice); since its inception in 1951, it has been one of Latin America’s most important platforms for both international and local modern and contemporary art. It has introduced and renewed connections among artists, visitors, and curators; has stimulated crucial debates. Now that a number of art institutions and organizations have developed in the region, however, the biennial’s original role as popular educator is less pertinent. This changed landscape was taken as a starting point by Mesquita and Cohen: If it was no longer necessary to initiate new audiences, could the goal instead be to revisit the very role of the biennial itself? The curators thus focused on artwork that reflexively engaged and archival practices - the kind of art, in fact, that does not garner much attention in mainstream venues. The biennial invited viewers to study Léa Mira Brander’s many detailed and deeply personal copper-plate prints in low vitrines. It allowed you to read about Jean-Luc Godard’s engagement with tele-vision networks in Mozambique, in a sculptural installation by Angela Ferreira. You could select photographs from Armin Linke’s archive and print your own booklet on-site. Most significantly, when it came to the exhibition’s overall structure, the “department store model” of previous biennials with art occupying every square inch - was replaced by a sparsely installed group exhibition. The artworks were displayed on the fourth floor; the third floor was almost completely empty; a well-selected archive of video art and a video lounge were on the second floor; and a blank “square” for film, music, and dance performances occupied the ground floor. All of which turned out to be hugely controversial: It angered those who wanted business as usual, who expected art en masse and by well-known artists. Most significantly, when it came to the exhibition’s overall structure, the “department store model” of previous biennials with art occupying every square inch - was replaced by a sparsely installed group exhibition: The artworks were displayed on the fourth floor; the third floor was almost completely empty; a well-selected archive of video art and a video lounge were on the second floor; and a blank “square” for film, music, and dance performances occupied the ground floor. All of which turned out to be hugely controversial: It angered those who wanted business as usual, who expected art en masse and by well-known artists. With only forty-one artists in the exhibition, there was ample time to engage each artwork, many of which demanded focused attention. And for the first time, the Oscar Niemeyer-designed pavilion, with its Corbusian open plan on each floor, participated on par with the artworks. There was, then, a feeling of relief in this biennial - relief from the burden of having to fully represent the vast category of contemporary art and of having to fill the space with artworks. Instead, the curators rethought the biennial in terms of what I am calling the curatorial. They mobilized an entire system of variables and contexts, carefully considering the history of the biennial, the current institutional situation in São Paulo and Brazil, the combination of artists and of artworks, and the unorthodox spatial organization of the building, in order to produce not a survey but a situation. Such an understanding of the curatorial allows us to read differently the claim - articulated by such diverse commentators as Irit Rogoff and Liam Gillick that the agenda of contemporary art in the past decade was to a large degree driven by curating, rather than by criticism or art history. Seen from this perspective, curating is not so much the product of curators as it is the fruit of the labor of a network of agents. The outcome is a stirring of smooth surfaces, a specific, multilayered way of agitating environments both inside and outside the white cube. The curatorial involves not just representing but presenting and testing; it performs something here and now instead of merely mapping something from there and then. It is serious about addressing the query, What do we want to add to the world and why? In this sense, the curatorial is a qualitative concept, just like the political in Mouffe. An unavoidable question arises, however: Has the curatorial produced more than an irritation in the art world, more than a temporary frisson? Has it had any lasting effect on how we think about art and the rest of the world? It is too soon to say. If the curatorial can be taken up by practically anyone within the field of contemporary art, this expansiveness could also appear to be just another instance of job diversification in the experience economy. Yet I do know that the business of traditional curating, like the car industry, needs to rethink its modes of production. With the proliferation of academic curatorial programs across the globe, creative thinking is needed to create professional opportunities - but also to torque the profession itself. The existing positions for curators simply won’t suffice. Art Forum, October 2009.
MARIA LIND as a WRITER on ART

As a writer on art, Lind has not achieved the same influence, even though she began her career as an art critic in Sweden. The newly published anthology Selected Maria Lind Writing should garner her a much-deserved wider readership. The volume, compiled by Brian Kuan Wood, an editor of e-flux journal, features essays, interviews, statements and research notes written in English between 1997 and 2010. In a nod to her curatorial methodology, in which she works closely with artists, often on projects that challenge the programming or organization of the institution for which she works, Lind, together with Kuan Wood, invited a handful of colleagues to select and comment on a few of her texts. Rather than feeling contrived, these responses, from curators Beatrice von Bismarck and Ana Paula Cohen, critic Tirzad Zoilghadr and artist Liam Gillick—designer of the book’s repellently bright yellow cover—reveal Lind’s open and trustful relationship with her collaborators. Selected Maria Lind Writing is divided into six thematic sections: “Expanded Fields,” “ Reflexivity,” “ Here and Now,” “ Working Together or Not,” “ Art and Artists” and “ Emboddedness.” The contents, however, are exceptionally difficult to categorize, ranging from essays on individual artists and groups, such as Deimantas Narkevičius, Philippe Parreno, Aplonija Šušteršic and Oda Projesi, to texts about Lind’s own and others’ exhibitions and projects, to reflections on art funding and its place in society. Although sprawling and prismatic, the volume successfully encapsulates Lind’s varied interests (art, politics, critical theory) and different roles (curator, director, educator), providing several parallel threads to follow. Still, a front-to-back reading proves demanding. Rather, it’s a volume to return to, time and again. The book’s length of over 400 pages might also discourage potential readers, but Lind’s prose, candid without being crude, makes for compelling reading. Her training as a newspaper critic, where direct and pedagogical writing is the rule, and the fact that these texts are written in her second language likely influenced the straightforward tone. Lind’s writing style developed during the thirteen years the volume spans, becoming more precise without becoming academic, but her voice remains her own from the outset. A critical contemplation of contemporary art and curatorial practice, Selected Maria Lind Writing presents texts that will inspire readers to understand art as a method of engagement. Lind shows that art, by shaping perception, can foster both aesthetic and critical engagement with the world without instrumentalizing or forcing those connections. More than merely providing insight into the mind and actions of one of today’s most influential curators, the book prompts readers to think about their own relationship to social, economic and political concerns, without even questioning the power of art.